

Chapter 3: Trapped

Raimie

As I approached the gate, I once more took note of how empty this fort had been. Even when exploring between its buildings, Rhylix and I had encountered not a soul. Sure, the battle had depleted this place's ranks, but that seemed unusual.

But then, the gate came into view, and I started quietly cursing. Chains, secured by a padlock, were helping to keep the gate closed.

This, by itself, wasn't unusual. With few available troops, a smart commander wouldn't post sentries here when a lock would do just as well.

The problem here was that the padlock wasn't facing the fort's interior. It was on the outside of the gate, ready for any enemy to break or pick it.

As he caught up with me, Rhylix said, "So, you see it too. This was a trap."

"How did they know we were coming?" I hissed.

"No clue," Rhylix said.

And inside, Nylion's whimpering went quiet.

Does it matter? he snarled. *Focus on keeping us safe, you-*

Cutting off, he wordlessly shrieked.

Do your job, heart of my heart.

Well, then. Someone was angry.

He was right, though. How could I get that gate open without springing the trap?

When we reached the wall's shadows, Rhylix dropped his Ele bubble, examining the gate and its chain with a frown.

Glancing back at me, he whispered, "Break it down with Daevetch?"

“Aren’t you the one who’s always cautioning me against using that?” I shot back. “Besides, I’d rather take Da’kul intact, if possible.”

And I might have an idea for how to do that. Pressing up against the gate, I reached through its bars and...

Yes! I could reach the padlock, which meant Rhylix should be able to-

“Well, *hello* there.”

Those three words, spoken in a silkily seductive voice, froze me solid for a split second. Twirling in place, I identified the speaker: a woman with faded lines of Corruption running rampant under her skin. With gleaming eyes, she’d directed a predatory smile at Rhylix, and at the sight of it, I...

Do NOT detach right now, Nylion growled. For the moment, you must hold it together.

His voice snapped me back from a drift into the clouds, and rapidly blinking, I shook my head, trying to shrug off the fog that had enveloped me as well. What had that been?

Later, Raimie, Nylion said. That woman looks ready to kill your friend.

Right. Present circumstances. I should focus on those.

Running her eyes over Rhylix, the woman said, “How did someone as lovely as you sneak into my fortress?”

So... she was the enemy commander.

“Hello, Nessaira,” Rhylix said. “I’d hoped to avoid meeting you again, but since that’s not to be... how can I help you on this fine evening?”

Was- Was he trying to distract her?

What other play could he be making, though? If he was distracting her, was I supposed to be doing something, and if so, what was it supposed to be?

Sighing, Nessaira crossed her arms.

“Since you got into this place undetected, I’m guessing you’re the Ele primeancer who’s been giving my people such trouble,” she said. “Given that, all I want is for you to die.”

...That sounded about right.

Wincing, Rhylix said, “Harsh. In that case, shouldn’t you get to killing me? Or trying to, at least.”

“Oh, I will.”

Smiling, Nessaira lifted her hand to crook two fingers, and with the sound of stomping feet, the ramparts above us filled with Kiraak.

That wasn't good. Time to execute the plan?

Yeah. I should probably do that.

"Rhy, lock pick set here, please," I said.

Thank the gods, my friend didn't question what I was doing. As he stuck a hand into a pocket, Nessaira leapt away from us, unslinging the tiny crossbow on her back.

"Who else is there?" she said.

"Oh, that's just Raimie. Don't worry about him."

Without removing his eyes from Nessaira, Rhylix tossed my requested items to me.

"I can give you a sixty count," he said.

Just a sixty count? With everything he was, I'd expected more time, although maybe I was overestimating my friend.

Still.

"That's plenty of time," I said.

Or at least, I hoped it would be.

Nessaira had apparently had enough.

Sneering, she snapped, "Kill this idiot."

And I spun back to the gate. As I grabbed the padlock through its bars, I ignored the sound of clashing steel behind me, trusting Rhylix to keep me safe. At the moment, my best course of action was to focus on my task, much as my body was screaming for me to join the fight.

So, I fumbled with a pick and wrench in the lock, using my newly gained knowledge to push pins into place. It seemed to take forever, and with every breath, I expected steel to part my flesh.

Soon enough, though, the padlock thumped into the grass, and I started ripping at its attached chain.

"Let's go, Rhy!" I shouted.

As I rushed through the new opening, he was on my heel, and together, we raced for the tree line, shooting Ele into the sky. Behind us, Nessaira shrieked, and I could hear her Kiraak struggling to get through the narrow gate, slowing down their attempt to follow us.

Good.

We were about a quarter of the way down the hill when the first soldiers responded to our signal. As they spilled out of the tree line, we slowed our pell-mell sprint, although we never stopped.

Beside me, Rhylix laughed.

“Hell, that was close,” he gasped before bumping into me. “When did you learn to pick locks?”

“About a half hour ago,” I said.

Snorting, Rhylix nearly tripped over himself, and I stuck my tongue out at him.

“I’m not as strait-laced as you might think, Rhy,” I said.

“Obviously not-”

Choking on his words, Rhylix reached for something, sticking through his neck, before tumbling to the ground, and without thought, I joined him there. Figuring out what had happened took me a moment—gods, he’d been shot!—but unlike months before, I didn’t panic at the thought.

Instead, I wriggled across the grass, digging my elbows into it, until I’d reached my friend, and braving a breath of exposure, I rolled him onto his side so I could snap the fletching off of the crossbow bolt in his neck. As I removed it, I ignored his empty eyes, focusing on what I knew.

Rhylix was Ele’s Champion. Because of this, the only person who could permanently kill him was his counterpart, Doldimar, and so, this death was only a minor hiccup in the grand scheme of things.

But as time dragged on, emphasizing each beat of my heart, doubt crawled into my mind.

Shaking my friend, I said, “Come *on*, Rhy. Get up. How will I explain it if you recover in front of my soldiers?”

They were quickly coming. I knew it, even if I also knew that reaching us would take a little while longer. Still, them coming across this mess could be awkward.

With a sharply drawn breath, Rhylix shot upright, clawing at his neck, before freezing.

“The bolt’s gone,” he said.

Glancing at me, he raised an eyebrow.

“You removed it?”

When I nodded, Rhylix softly chuckled.

“Thank you,” he said. “You saved me a wealth of trouble.”

What sort of trouble?

Shrugging, I said, "It wasn't a problem. Now, we should get out of here before-"

"You're not going anywhere."

Rhylix and I were on our feet before Nessaira had finished speaking, but even still, we barely dodged the crossbow bolt she'd shot at us. Panting, she was leaning on her knees with her weapon pointed at us.

"How are you alive?" she snapped. "I shot you. You went down. I saw it. So, how...?"

Even reloading as she was, neither I nor Rhylix moved, only exchanging a glance. Why risk rushing an armed woman when backup was so close?

"How do you think?" Rhylix said. "From what I've gathered, your Dark Lord's been rather chatty on this go 'round. So surely, you've heard mention of the Ele primeancer who refuses to die?"

Hissing, Nessaira recoiled from him.

"Champion of Ele," she said.

With a smile, Rhylix flourished a bow.

"At your service."

For the longest moment, Nessaira turned to stone, staring at us, but then, she spun and bolted for the forest, and I clicked my tongue.

"Rhy, can you-?"

"Already on it."

He took off in a flash of light, and I relaxed. While I was sure that Nessaira was dangerous, desperate to escape with news of what had happened here, I also knew that my friend would catch her.

So, as soldiers sprinted past me, soon to clash with the Kiraak, I joined them. It was time to finish taking this fort.

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